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ABSTRACT

With constant changes taking place in the practice of public relations, evaluation and modification are requisite to maintaining a competitive degree program with competitive graduates. Whether a program is in the process of being developed or is being evaluated for certification or reaccreditation, it is critical to look to current and future needs rather than simply review and compare the program against those at other institutions. The RACE formula (Research, Action, Communication, and Evaluation) provides the criteria necessary for creating and/or developing a public relations degree program. Primary research consisting of surveys of practitioners, students, and existing faculty will provide the data base necessary to generate a plan and will also meet regents' requirements. During the Action stage, survey results and data from similar programs can be used to establish specific requirements. An advisory board is valuable at this point to ensure currentness of the program and the board can serve to integrate practitioners and academians in the educational process. The Communication/Evaluation stages encompass the implementation of the program and the monitoring of its continued usefulness and appropriateness. A beneficial public relations degree program must be future-based, integrate professors and professionals, and should be based on an interdisciplinary approach. The RACE formula creates the data and produces the dividends necessary to create such a program. (NH)

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Designing A Public Relations Degree
-- The Data and The Dividends

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Designing A Public Relations Degree -- The Data and The Dividends

Public relations practitioner David Ferguson (1987), former United States Steel public affairs manager and a senior consultant at Hill and Knowlton, said, "What is taught today will have a relatively short life and will have to be altered considerably almost on a yearly basis if education is to continue to keep pace with practice in our profession. Thoughtful faculty members are constantly studying their courses and sequences to see that they do keep pace."

With constant changes in the practice of public relations, evaluation and modifications are requisite to maintaining a competitive program with competitive graduates. Whether creating or evaluating a program, it is critical to look ahead to current and future needs rather than just reviewing and comparing a program against plans implemented at other schools decades ago. While this paper focuses on the creation of a public relations major, most points are equally valid for schools in the evaluation stages, especially ones considering certification and those facing reaccreditation.

Developing a public relations program entails essentially the same processes used to teach public relations. The simplified model of public relations reflected in the RACE -- Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation -- formula provides the criteria necessary for examining the processes of creating and/or developing a public relations degree program. In this paper, Research reflects the data required; Action is the program design; and Communication and Evaluation will be collapsed to represent the program's implementation, its continued development, and its dividends.

I. RESEARCH

Before proposing any public relations sequence, expect to start at the same place any public relations plan begins -- research designed to prepare one for the action phases. Primary research consisting of surveys of

practitioners, students and existing faculty, as well as secondary materials on other programs, will provide the data base necessary to generate a plan that will fit into your program while also meeting practitioners' expectations and regents' requirements.

Since the action phase in this case focuses on the program development itself, objectives and audiences should be defined during the research phases. Of course these two will be intertwined and the background research will help answer both. Related to the objectives and audiences are the justification and need for the program; i.e., what kind of student demand do you anticipate and what kind of enrollment estimates can you make, what are the other programs available within your state and/or region, and why will your program be unique?

At this point, surveys provide helpful data for answering these questions, and later they provide justification and validation. Surveys should be designed for public relations practitioners and students. Practitioners can help address very specific questions such as describing the job market, a tough one to handle these days. But one advantage of the public relations degree program is that foresight will lend students the breadth and versatility to open up other job markets. Also while conducting a survey of practitioners, request information about recommended coursework, etc., since the results will also document the recommended program plan.

Estimates of the potential number of students can be determined from the surveys as well as by checking percentages of majors in marketing/advertising, journalism, broadcasting and organizational communication. From most reports, public relations will have at least one and one half the number of broadcasting majors, double or triple the journalism majors, yet about one half the marketing/advertising majors. The student survey, in particular, can also provide an estimated number of students who would be diverted from other programs because of interest in a more specific degree program. One note of caution when developing these numbers is that experience has shown that most students do not choose public relations majors until late in their sophomore

year or early in their junior year. This should be reflected in any breakdown of the number of majors according to classification as well as any breakdown of class and faculty projections.

While obtaining information from students and practitioners, conduct an audit of current faculty. Faculty vita can reveal specialized areas of interest that will allow individuals to contribute to a program in unique ways. Often times, program developers know only what someone is teaching now, and not what else they can do. Consider getting some kind of listing of courses faculty have taught and taken at other institutions if this information is not already available on the vita. For example, if one faculty member had specialized coursework in negotiations and a dissertation on labor relations, this person would be an asset to the program development, especially in making your program different from others within the region the college serves.

Information from these surveys allows for future-based programs with high potential for success. While looking ahead, secondary research can provide further data to strengthen the proposed public relations degree. A review of existing programs at schools within your state and region provides an analysis of the competition and a starting point for creation of a unique program. Other information needed includes estimated expenses, an inventory of facilities and library holdings, and options for financial assistance. It is also not too early to begin envisioning the means for administrating the degree program.

To assist you in gathering the research, identifying appropriate faculty and developing the program, consider establishing an advisory board. An advisory board, furthermore, can lend credence to your report, especially if those involved academically are only marginally involved in public relations

II. ACTION

Using your survey results and other similar programs, your specific requirements can be established. You may have determined that one or more

existing programs can be expanded for a public relations sequence (e.g., significant blocks of persuasion & group discussion courses, advertising, journalism or organizational communication sequences which are offered through your department). This will save research time as well as set-up time, while also providing an overall direction to the program.

An advisory board is invaluable at this point to ensure currentness of the program, and the concept of such a board meets the call, resounded by many (Brody, 1991; Schwartz, Yarbrough, and Shakra, 1992), to integrate practitioners and academicians in the educational processes. The integration has advantages beyond developing an appropriate core of courses for successful students. The need to work together extends to research processes and results which are recycled in the education of both students and the practitioners. According to VanSlyke Turk (1993, p. 19), "Through graduate level instruction, professional development workshops and research that sheds light on the factors that contribute to public relations effectiveness, educators can -- and should -- be in the forefront of giving practitioners the tools they need to speak management's language."

The integration of research and theory into public relations education is a significant contribution to the practice and continuing education of practitioners. Traditional speech communication departments offer invaluable rhetorical and empirical research experience and theory which can help practitioners make more enlightened and objective decisions in public relations consulting and communication.

Another element of program design that might be worth delving into is at the graduate level. If a school does not appear to have all that is necessary for an undergraduate program (i.e., means and faculty to teach the publicity, technician and graphics roles), then look for opportunities at another level. Graduate school has always specialized in theory and research, and that is the kind of advanced work practitioners seek. Advanced study in conflict management, negotiation, organizational communication, corporate culture, etc., offer the perfect opportunity to mesh theory and practice.

Actually, with the numbers of students already going into the field, this could well be a more attractive niche for a college -- depending on regional needs. Certainly if a school is located in a larger city with no available graduate-level degrees, a graduate rather than undergraduate market would be well worth targeting. This, too, allows an existing program to adapt, while taking greater advantage of current resources and areas of expertise.

Moreover, in keeping with the idea of instituting a program with opportunities to develop relationships between those teaching and those doing, an organizational scholarship program would be invaluable to faculty and students, as well as the school and organization. Organizations could offer graduate school scholarships for their own employees. Given the theoretical and research orientations of graduate programs, organizations would certainly benefit by sending entry-level employees, with proven track records, to school to enhance their counseling skills which would, of course, contribute back to their organizations (Ferguson, 1987).

While a graduate public relations program can be adopted easily by existing academic programs, an undergraduate degree will require careful construction as the best ones are based on an interdisciplinary framework. Specific content areas for recommended public relations sequences appear relatively similar across journalism, mass communication and speech programs.

According to a recent survey (Schwartz et al., 1992), the top ten components for public relations degree programs, in order of those viewed as "quite or very important," are writing skills, internship and work experience, problem-solving skills, media relations techniques, presentation/speaking skills, people management skills, general liberal arts knowledge, social trends/issue analysis, research skills, and business and finance knowledge.

The same authors (Schwartz et al., 1992) recommend that those involved in developing public relations programs should keep in mind that many of the practitioners, especially those with longer tenures in their fields, will not have public relations degrees, which naturally will affect their impressions

of a degree program. But the authors assert that based on the survey, a preliminary "dialogue" can be construed as having occurred and as resulting in the following recommendations of general content areas to be represented in public relations degree programs: writing and speaking skills; critical analysis ability, "the focus of any collegiate major"; strategic communication planning ability involving audience analysis, goal setting and evaluation; career orientation which when combined with strategic communication planning would constitute the professional emphasis of a program along with internship experience; and studies in communication science ranging from sociology, psychology, persuasion, motivation, public opinion and mass communication.

In "ASK/PR: An Outcome Perspective on Public Relations Education," Gibson (1992-93), wrote that students graduating from public relations programs should have appropriate attitudes, skills, knowledge, professional affiliation, and a resume and portfolio. His article emphasized the balance graduates should achieve between the practical or professional and the theoretical. In terms of the practical, this suggests public relations program development should encompass practical opportunities such as internship programs, and student groups such as Public Relations Student Society of America and public relations firms. And from the academic side, Gibson wrote, "All those claiming to be public relations practitioners ought to know about at least eight subjects: ethics, communication theory, persuasion, mass media, public relations, social psychology, psychology and business administration" (p. 46). Moreover, he specified the need for specialized work in areas including journalism, broadcast production, art and speech communication.

The Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education (1987), a study co-sponsored by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Public Relations Society of America, and the Educators Section of PRSA, offers a model for public relations study. By producing a model, the Commission emphasized its goal was not to make any distinctions or pass judgments on which academic departments would provide a

better home for public relations. The symbol for the recommended program development was a square, with three quarters of the space representing a liberal arts and sciences program. One fourth would be the professional education comprised equally (15 semester or 22 quarter hours) of communications studies and public relations studies (p. 28).

The communication studies area encompasses (1) Technical/Production classes such as copy preparation and editing, graphic arts and typography, still photography, production for electronic media, and public speaking and oral presentation; (2) Historical/Institutional classes which would include history, law and ethics, and management; and (3) Communication Process/Structure focusing on the theories. Note that the Report does recognize that students cannot take all classes recommended for these areas of professional education, but should take as much as possible.

The studies in public relations cover at least five aspects of public relations: (1) principles, practices and theory, usually addressed in the introductory course; (2) techniques including writing, message dissemination and media networks; (3) research for planning and evaluating; (4) strategy and implementation covered in case studies and/or campaign courses; (5) supervised public relations experience including internship, practicum and cooperative studies. A sixth area, if the opportunity exists within a program, is specialized advanced study in areas such as public affairs, international public relations, financial relations, employee relations, fund-raising and membership development.

The Commission further reported that educators and practitioners are remarkably similar in their recommendations for courses in public relations programs of study. With a solid foundation of public relations courses, an internship program can be established. Other schools would most likely share site information since the number of requests for interns generally exceeds the number of students interning. Local professional chapters are also helpful; for example, the Atlanta Chapter of PRSA has a newsletter which includes internship openings. Even smaller towns contain many opportunities:

the chamber of commerce; a small public relations/marketing firm; the hospital; the board of education; and, of course, the college - with its departments of alumni relations, development, sports information, and admissions and/or recruitment.

Student organizations will also be vital to the program. While courses can cover many primary concerns, students need more opportunities to continue learning about different types of and different practices involved in public relations. Professional groups such as PRSSA are grounded in serving these purposes. Moreover, it is the student arm of PRSA which supports many chapters and programs of study. There are conditions. For example, a college must have faculty and professional advisors who are members of PRSA, and the college must have at least a five-course public relations sequence, which can include the internship. Other similar groups include the International Association of Business Communicators. In addition to the professional group, consider opportunities for continued practical experience. Some schools set up separate student-operated public relations firms, while others coordinate the firm with the professional chapter.

Regardless of the particular constellation of courses for the degree program, it should be based on practitioners' assessments in coordination with professors' mainstay -- research. For example, several studies have identified specific public relations roles which would affect the types of classes required. While entry-level positions, the technicians, focus on the writing, upper level positions, the consultants, require advisory and management skills. Naturally a significant block of the required courses should be in skill development, but while learning these skills, students need to understand how articles, newsletters, speeches, etc., fit into the big picture -- the overall campaign and decision-making processes.

With the program development detailing specific courses and due consideration given to other opportunities such as internships and professional associations, begin putting the report together. Of course, any feedback from others in your school who have made similar proposals will be

helpful, as will sample reports and a board of regents' outline of specific requirements.

III. Communication/Evaluation

The communication and evaluation stages encompass the implementation of the program and the monitoring of the continued usefulness and appropriateness of the program. In the implementation stages, professors must be hired or channeled into the program's positions. Besides taking advantage of existing faculty expertise, plan to add those with public relations education. This has been a key concern for those in professional associations for some time now. IPRA's Gold Paper No. 7: Public Eduction -- Recommendations and Standards, reviewed by E.W. Brody (1991), highlights the concern over who is teaching what. "We recommend that solid public relations degree programmes be developed and nurtured at leading universities, and until such time as there are adequately qualified instructors, we caution against creation of public relations programmes at every university."

Based on a survey, VanSlyke Turk (1992, p. 16), reported, "Faculty and administrators strongly agreed, however, that journalism, rhetoric or speech faculty are not qualified to teach public relations courses. In fact, administrators were even more vehement than faculty that those who teach public relations should have public relations credentials and backgrounds." Unfortunately, in another article (1993), she also reported, "Regarding career opportunities, it's very likely that in 1993 there will be more vacant public relations faculty positions than qualified candidates to fill them."

Obviously, definite standards should be set and adhered to. Another option is to start with one central person with public relations degree work and experience, while others support the program within their own areas of expertise. Having someone with substantial field experience along with a master's degree to fill a practitioner line, can also help to meet standards for faculty excellence. The only problem with the latter is that many feel the calling -- or the need to get out of the rat race into the world of

academia will allow them to practice and inspire budding practitioners -- but few answer to the salary scales available.

Furthermore, adhering to established hiring standards means checking on those who say they are in public relations. Various job searches have produced artists, theater directors, secondary school teachers, and gourmet chefs who have set up chili cook-offs all queuing up for that public relations position. This has happened even when the position advertisement has mandated public relations education and experience.

Another factor which a school must be sensitive to in the hiring process is balancing the male/female faculty ratio. While that seems to go without saying, in public relations, this suggestion comes not from EEOC guidelines, but from a profession with concerns over high percentages of female practitioners. A school with a female-only staff, tends to reinforce such gender-specific professional affiliations. In schools with female and male public relations faculty, the chances of obtaining a balance of students, too, can be improved. Naturally, these same points can be made for providing opportunities for minorities. And with impending demographical changes leading to a dramatically different workforce, and thus workplace, the need for role models and multicultural viewpoints in the educational setting becomes absolutely imperative for the future success of practitioners and their organizations.

With implementation comes the necessary evaluation. Gibson (1992-93, p. 47) emphasized this point writing, "... so much change is occurring that education must be continually improved to stay relevant." For example, over the past ten years, desktop publishing has taken over most public relations departments and firms, indicating revisions for any program's currency and competitiveness. Now greater concerns for international and multicultural affairs suggest further changes to prepare students for the workforce.

When evaluating the program, balance seems to be the critical factor. Pitfalls of program development include too much or too little breadth, too much or too little theory or practice, and a lack of an interdisciplinary

approach. The IPRA Paper reviewed by Brody (1991) stressed the need for balance, especially between practitioners and academicians. "... Elitist teachers claiming the total responsibility in their own field without any interference by practitioners and elitist practitioners demanding training that is 100 percent devoted to practical solutions ... harm the education of young people who seek a career in public relations practice."

Peer evaluation in the form of accreditation can also provide validity to your decision making and your program. PRSA offers a certification program (CEPR) created in response to requests from academia largely attributed to ineligibility based on the standards set by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which excludes groups in schools of Arts & Science and business. The CEPR would include a public relations program sequence offering a five-course sequence, generally as described in the Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education (1987) reviewed earlier. This sequence does include internship opportunities. In 1992, five schools had CEPR status (Patruno).

In planning, too, one must remember that public relations can be an extremely cost-efficient program since students ideally take courses from a variety of academic disciplines. However, while the program itself is cost-efficient, public relations students can, according to a recent survey (VanSlyke Turk, 1992), constitute 30% of a given program but be allocated only 15% of the operating budget.

At the same time, the degree program can also be labor intensive when trying to balance out practical opportunities with academic ones. Internship programs, advisory boards, practical experiences through classes are time consuming. The benefits, of course, are better and more internships, stronger alumni relations, and more opportunities for pooling efforts between professors and professionals.

The dividends of all this work are considerable benefits to professors, departments, schools and communities. Monetary value cannot be placed on the projects. Consider the following projects, whether professional or

philanthropic, taken on by PRSSA or students in classes. Students have been involved in creating numerous collateral materials from flyers and brochures to surveys. School departments such as the Museum, the Music Department and the Marching Band, the Communication Arts Department, and Alumni Relations all have obtained ideas for special events, membership, newsletters, etc., and have implemented many of the students' suggestions. Students have worked on promoting Theatre South productions. And different organizations from the Humane Society to Georgia Mining Association have also benefitted from access to new public relations ideas and creative problem solving.

An additional benefit was reported in "Educators need to Communicate Better on and off Campus" (Bovet, 1992, p. 17), is that public relations professors, because of their areas of expertise, can contribute to the college and its larger community in "mediating and building consensus."

The key is that so many can benefit from a public relations degree program. To benefit, a program must be future-based, integrate professors and professionals as well as academic and practical opportunities, and consequently, should be based on an interdisciplinary approach. Programs can be created or improved by following the R-A-C-E formula which creates the data and produces the dividends.

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